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ABSTRACT

Forty years after the establishment of democracy in Italy, democratic values need to be reinforced in the younger generations. This paper discusses democracy in post-World War II Italy and specifically addresses: (1) dissenting political parties' activities; (2) a qualitative change in political participation; and (3) the Italian perception of democratic society. The role of education should be to promote democratic values in youth through the reconstruction of history instruction focusing on a re-shaping between man and institutions, the significance of democratic institutions, and participation in the community. A 17-item bibliography of Italian sources is included. (DJC)

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ITALIAN YOUTH AND DEMOCRACY: FORTY YEARS AFTER THE CONSTITUTION

by

Giorgio Campanini

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Forty Years after the Constitution

ITALIAN YOUTH AND DEMOCRACY

The constitution of the Italian Republic, drafted between 1946 and 1947, went into effect on January 1, 1948. It represents the foundation of democracy in Italy, a democracy which has been achieved slowly but surely in the difficult passage from the liberal institutions of the eighteen hundreds to the new democratic state born after the fall of Fascism, and long in preparation by the opposition to the pre-war regime and by the Resistance, the ideological and armed movements.

Forty years after the approval of the Constitution, the democratic institutions seem well consolidated in the minds of the people, but they still need to be up-dated, especially in the eyes of the younger generations. Democracy was challenged in 1968 and in 1978 - first in the name of a Utopian "New Society" without authority and without power, and then during the long and bloody struggle against the central powers of which Aldo Moro was a symbol, and one of the victims. This struggle has now been overcome but the Italian democracy must still be mad liveable and more credible and hence a value which the new generations can share and use as a point of reference for the future.

The constant refounding of democracy - never considering that the accomplishments of far-off 1948 have been attained once and for all - is the task of a democratic state. Schools cannot remain neutral or detached in such an endeavour

because it is a democratic school which has a fundamental role in educating future citizens.

The risk of taking it for granted

After the dramatic phase in Italian political life which led laboriously to the establishment of the democratic institutions existing in Italy today, those very institutions now run the risk of becoming a fossilized set-up. For complex political and historical reasons and the presence of a strong party in the centre of the political spectrum - the Christian Democratic party which has influenced a broad electorate, mostly from Catholic circles, in developing democratic positions - in post-war Italy, the political right has had very littleroom for manoeuvre (unlike the economic right which has nevertheless not put in doubt democracy as a value, even if it holds a different view of society). In particularly delicated periods of Italian history, and especially during periods of prolonged political crises (quite undecipherable to most people), there have also been spurts of authoritarianism and attempts to propose a "presidential republic" similar to that under Charles De Gaulle in France. On the whole however, the main parties and the most representative trade unions have always defended the constitution of 1948 considering it the framework for the life of the society, and if anything, demanding stricter adherence to its precepts and the up-dating and modification of some of its clauses, to better suit the changed social, political and cultural conditions of the country.

In two phases in Italian history - the 1945-48 period, and the years immediately preceding and following 1970 - there was also a drive towards a form of authoritarianism of the left. The first was in the aftermath of the electoral victories of the left-wing parties at a time when they were closely linked to the Soviet experience and the second was the result of an increase in power of "proletariat and student avant-garde movements" like those on the scene in 1968, inspired by the anarchist ideologies of the Frankfurt school and of its North American and European counterparts.

On the whole however, these attempts aiming at the overthrow of the democratic state, either by the right or by the left, had only minority support and were never backed by the most influential and representative parties or unions, beginning with the Communist party, as it was in the years following the "destalinization process" which had a particularly strong impact in Italy.

Authoritarian tendencies have shown their head periodically in Italian society and re-emerge every once in a while. The most recent example was , in the eighties, in the form of a "government of 'technicians'" who wanted to subordinate institutions to needs considered to have priority in a technologically advanced society, founded therefore on the values of rapid decisions and efficiency. Despite a certain influence they did have, these stances were nevertheless marginal and had a

fairly negligible impact on that sort of "prejudice" in favour of democracy which generally characterizes Italian public opinion.

The fact that the democratic form of government seems to be an accepted fact, even and especially among young people, entails some danger nonetheless. First of all, some consider that it is pointless to defend democracy (and against whom in any case, for no one professes explicitely to be anti-democratic?). The belief that democracy is a kind of acquired point of no return, as are its institutions, is too wide-spread and superficial. Many do not realize that because of its particular structure, democracy cannot resist long without the consensus and direct participation of the people.

Drop in participation

Considering political democracy a stable and definitively consolidated phenomenon leads inevitably to a drop in participation, both politically and socially. According to how far it spreads and how deeply radicated it is among the up-and-coming generations, this phenomenon in turn, gives rise to problems casting dark omens on the future of democratic institutions in Italy.

The fact peculiar to the Italian situation is the double and almost simultaneous crisis in consenting participation and dissenting participation.

"Consenting participation" is based on the assumption that the political and institutional framework established by the 1948 constitution is substantially valid, and on the conviction

that this is the way to achieve a new and improved social structure in which, by simply following the indications of the fundamental principles of the constitution, values such as equality among citizens, social justice, and fundamental civil rights, may be guaranteed. In this view, participation involves commitment, actions, struggles and suffering to achieve a high political ideal. However, most young people of the new generations consider, rather superficially, that these values have already been acquired, or else that they are not feasible in a society that can only in part be modified. They think therefore that it must be accepted as it is. Each one has simply to carve out a kind of private space where he can realize his own "private happiness", rather than attempt to attain a "public happiness" goal.

"Dissenting participation" is based on the drafting of an alternative project for society and, more explicitely in the Italian context, on the assumption that the constitution must be seriously and completely applied by implementing its various goals, enacting its values and overcoming negative conditioning which obstructs the accomplishment of its goals - a good society.

The conviction that democratic institutions no longer need to be defended and that they cannot really be modified, inevitably leads to the decline in participative interest. In the first case participating is superfluous, and in the second, useless.

Against this backdrop, or rather with this feeling so prevalent, the well-known phenomenon of the crisis in ideology

occurs. It seems to follow a phase of exaltation experienced in all Western countries in the years around 1968. The commitment of a civilized society to reinforce its institutions or to alter them radically always presupposes in some way, an overall vision of politics and therefore an ideology. But with the season of "strong thinking" (liberalism of the eighteen hundreds, the "Chrisitian society" projects promoted by Catholic-democratic-inspired parties, the ideal of classless, "socialist society" and so on) giving way to the season of the "weak thinking" (according to which one ideology equals another), it is easy to understand why the main spring triggering particiation has disappeared and why there is no longer the will to act on society and the conviction that politics is a factor of change.

When there is instead a tendency to regard politics as a mere instrument for holding power, and in the end, as a means for administering what exists it is quite easy to reach the conclusion that participating or not participating, comes to the same thing, since the course of things will not in any case change.

From the state to a civil society

The crisis of "consenting participation", as well as the crisis of "dissenting participation", seems substantially to reflect the general decline in ideologies and a wide-spread crisis in the importance of making projects which involves most noticeably the field of politics. It is generally felt that everything has been said and that politics does not affect other

spheres, especially science and technology for which new, exciting prospects are constantly opening up. In a highly dynamic society - in a certain sense this is especially the case in a democratic society - politics appears to be a realm for the conservation of the status quo, the structure whose very immobility allows for the flourishing or dynamism of other spheres (technology in particular).

It must be mentioned that the drop in participation, since it is linked to the decline of ideologies and to the general lack of projects common to the whole of the Western world including Italy, does not extend to all areas of social life but seems particularly to affect high level politics and much less low level politics (here too we could say that "small is beautiful"). It could also be said that this is not so much a wide-spread, vertical drop in participation as a preferential shift into the realm of civic society.

Confirmation of this attitude is found in the upsurge of volunteer activities which cover wide areas and cater to needs which the "Welfare State" has not known how or has been unable to handle adequately, and is also apparent in the success environmental movements have recently enjoyed, even in the specifically political-electoral sphere, and in the lively forms of participation in local communities especially as concerns specific problems people feel are important and urgently in need of solutions.

The broad spectrum of these complex phenomena should probably be interpreted in the sense that citizens, and young people, direct their energy to what they think has some chance of success. They feel that the political system cannot be substantially modified (and that these modifications in the system are really not that necessary after all), but they are also convinced that there is ample space for participation and the possibility to make a concrete impact on certain social phenomena, especially when there are impelling motives and urgent needs (the deterioration of the environment, wide-spread use of drugs, extension of zones inhabitants by the poor and social drop-outs and so on.)

This indicates a qualitative change in participation rather than a drop in participation. This shift in perspective ends up involving the young first of all. They have not lived through the experience of a dictatorship and they think that a return to authoritarianism and the disappearance of civil liberties are impossible and take for granted that the institutions of the democratic state are here to stay. They intend to operate within this democratic state to improve the way it functions and its efficiency. This attitude is probably shared by a minority however since the volunteer groups and environmentalist movements referred to above should nevertheless be considered as focal points for a minority while the majority pays only a ritual and formal tribute to the democratic institutions and substantially underestimates politics inasmuch as

they consider that it has little effect on their daily lives or "happiness" as citizens. They tend then to concentrate their efforts on the search for private happiness rather than the pursuit of the "common good" through politics or any direct or personal engagement in what is "social".

The role of the school

The school reflects, and indeed cannot but reflect, this general change in climate vis-a-vis politics. The school is part of society and in one way or another is subject to the repercussions. Highly politicized in the years around 1968 when it was said that "everything is political" it seems under-politicized now in the eighties - an era in which "politics is not everything"; in fact it seems a substantially secondary aspect of existence which is hardly worth dedicating too much time to.

If the school were a mere sound box for what was happening outside, this state of affairs could easily be accepted as "natural". However, education means looking beyond and taking on the overall formation of a person which includes the education of the citizen, or member of the community. Especially in a climate of disaffection with politics, it is the school's task - since it is given, as it should be given, that politics is an important and significant reality - to promote the dignity and the value of politics and to provide young people with the necessary cognitive instruments of political reality on both a historical and theoretical plane.

The social dimension of education seems therefore essential and ineluctable. The fact that this dimension has been generally underestimated in no way implies that the path chosen is the best, as well as being that most in keeping with the spirit of the a democratic state and its laws, which govern the various stages of public education (public whether it be provided by "state" schools or "private" schools).

The conviction that democracy once achieved, is achieved once and for all may have found its way, unconsciously, into the school as well. What may not be well understood is that it is because it is based on the free and continuous consensus of the members of the society, that democracy is a reality and that it must be built steadily day by day as the new generations grow and reach the age when they cross the threshold into adult life. They find democracy already made, but they must learn to realize that it is not a "natural" state but a choice and a choice, that must be renewed with each generation.

Viewed from this angle, the history lesson becomes fundamental as it shows what labour was expended, what uncertainties were faced, what obstacles were surmounted before the democratic institutions were established here, and in a fairly limited part of the world. It teaches how this system of government, with its limits and defects, is better as it guarantees both the rights to freedom of the members of the society and the satisfaction of their fundamental needs. It is in this historical perspective that democracy stands out as a kind

of constant challenge, the result of which is continually put in doubt. Democracy never completely a fait accompli but a goal constantly before us which the young generations must come as near to as possible.

Part of education in the values of democracy is to urge young people to become directly engaged in the community and in society. It is here that democracy is built day after day, by serving one's fellow man who is the focal point of civil and social life. No other interest, however grand or noble, must ever be allowed to take precedent over this objective.

In conclusion, then, the three-fold task of the school to constantly refound democracy is:

- to help, through an intelligent reconstruction of history to understand the relation between man and the institutions in the various periods;
- to focus on the overall significance of the institutions of the democratic state, reconstructing the factors which led to their birth and illustrating their development and emerging problems;
- to foster direct participatory experience, both in the school and in the community in general, because this is the testing ground for practicing that attitude towards life without which no one ever becomes a fulfilled man or woman.

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